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ABSTRACT

A common problem for teachers and students is that the teacher's control of the communication in the classroom limits the students' use of their language to learn. Group learning, an alternative to the traditional teacher-led classroom structure, can enhance the students' opportunity to use their language. An understanding of the following three factors has important implications for the language arts classroom, namely, that: (1) students bring complex theories or representations of the world to the learning situation; (2) students already have highly developed language learning skills; and (3) talking and writing as well as reading and listening are valuable language learning tools. The use of these world views and language skills is central to students' learning. Teachers should remember when choosing materials and strategies that students' motivation for learning is their desire or need to make sense of the world by confirming or revising their world view. Language is the system by which they recode experiences into theories so that they can operate or elaborate on them. Language makes thoughts visible so that they are available for introspection and revision. Talking and writing are powerful learning tools because the students learn from the ideas for others. Language arts classrooms restructured on the basis of these implications can be truly learner-centered, and have the potential to be lively, exciting places where all participants are engaged in meaningful learning. (Eighteen references are attached.) (PRA)

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Joshua Johnson and Brent Jordheim, students at Ben Franklin Jr. High in Fargo, ND; and Debra Kramer, a student teacher at Ben Franklin Jr. High in the Fall of 1990.

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The Learner-Centered Classroom: Explorations Into Language and Learning

by

Barbara J. Livdahl
Concordia College
Moorhead, MN

I have always considered myself a student-centered teacher. In the nearly 20 years I taught high school English, my guiding questions as I planned curriculum revolved around making connections between students' interests and abilities and the content or skills to be learned: How can I capture the students' interest? What do they know about this already? What activities can they do to help them learn? Which students will find this too easy or too hard? I thought I knew what the terms "student-centered" and "active learning" meant. But in the last four years I have begun to see "student-centered" in a different way. In fact, I now prefer to use the term "learner centered."

My exploration began when Don Arenz, my colleague at Concordia College, encouraged me to use a collection box in the first year discourse classes I was teaching instead of formal essay assignments. Don explained that when a collection box is used, students are encouraged to submit writings of their choice, and the teacher and peers respond with reader-based comments like those described in Elbow's (1981) *Writing With Power*. It seemed likely to me that if the teacher no longer chose the subjects and forms, students would be free to write about subjects they were interested in and to focus on their own problems and questions that arose as they worked to convey their ideas and impressions to their readers. I was astonished and pleased with the quantity and quality of writing the students produced and the growth they displayed using this approach. Furthermore, the classroom became a highly motivated community of authors who were engaged in "real" writing for "real" audiences.

Then I read the book *In the Middle* by Nancie Atwell (1987) as a part of my doctoral coursework. I was attracted to the reading and writing workshops she described because her eighth-grade Boothbay Harbor students were behaving like real readers and writers. They were choosing their own books to read and their own forms to use and subjects to write about. They were solving their own reading and writing problems as they met them in the context of their daily reading and writing. And they were motivated by the joy of exploration, learning, accomplishment, and authorship. In addition to a thorough and inspiring account of the reading and writing workshops, Atwell provided a full bibliography of sources related to her practice, and I chose books from the list to read as I prepared to revise the Secondary Reading Methods course I teach.

Reading Without Nonsense by Frank Smith (1985) was perhaps the most influential of those books. It introduced me to the idea that students come to the classroom with complex theories of the world and highly developed language learning skills, that this theory of the world forms the base out of which flows the predicting, hypothesizing, testing, and reforming that compose the learning process, and that language is central to the entire learning process. As the Secondary Reading Methods students and I worked with these ideas, it became evident that this theory has broad implications for learning and teaching.

The following summer I participated in New York University's program in Oxford, England. There I became aware of the importance of oral language to learning and the power of the social context in either enhancing or limiting the students' opportunity to use their language to learn. Douglas Barnes' (1975) book *From Communication to Curriculum* made me aware of the teacher's control of the communication in the classroom and the way it limits the students' use of their language to learn. It also sparked my interest in group learning as a possible alternative to the traditional teacher-led classroom structure.

My learning is not complete and my exploration continues. Today, however, I am convinced that 1) because learners have been using language to make sense of the world since birth, they have constructed complex theories of the world and highly developed language learning skills which they bring to the learning situation; 2) language is central to learning; and 3) writing and speaking, as well as reading and listening, are important language learning tools. In this article I would like to share my current thinking about these ideas with you.

Learners Have Constructed Complex Theories of the World

In *Reading Without Nonsense*, Frank Smith (1985) labels what all people have in their heads that helps them to make sense of the words, "theory of the world." The theory of the world is the source of the hypotheses and predictions that are integral to the process of learning. Smith describes it this way:

> This theory is the basis of all our perception and understanding of the world; it is the root of all learning, the source of all hopes and fears, motives and expectations, reasoning and creativity. This theory is all we have; there is nothing else. If we can make sense of the world at all, it is by interpreting events in the world with respect to our theory. If we can learn at all, it is by modifying and elaborating our theory. (p. 73)

Smith uses the word theory because he believes the theory of the world operates just like the theories scientists use. The theories are summaries of our past experiences. Using them we are able to predict what we will experience with a great deal of certainty. This keeps us from being in a continual state of bewilderment and confusion. For example, as we walk down the street, we predict that most of the people we meet will have black, brown, or blond hair (mostly blond in North Dakota). We are only surprised when we see someone with purple or green hair. When we read a novel or short story, we predict our way through, and we are only surprised if the ending doesn't match our predictions. Prediction plays an important role in reading also. For example, the context of a story and the length of a word signal our brains to reduce the number of choices as we search for the right word. Because of the context and the word length we are able to predict that a large number of words will not work.

The process by which we construct the theory of the world is a model of the process of learning carried on throughout life. Children begin to use the process at birth as infants seek to make sense of the world. It is important to note that the motivation for learning is the desire or need to make sense. This has implications for teachers in their choices of materials and strategies. Teachers must be sure that materials always offer the possibility of making sense.

The process of learning is a process of hypothesizing, predicting on the basis of the hypothesis, testing the prediction, and reinterpreting the world representation, or

modifying the hypothesis. Let me use an example to explain. A small child and her mother are watching the movie "Bambi." The little girl knows that when she talks about two cars and when she asks for more than one cookie, she adds the /z/; therefore, she *hypothesizes* that the way to say more than one is to add the /z/, and *predicts* that to talk about more than one deer, she will have to add the /z/. She *tests* this by saying to her mother, "The deers are all sad." Likely, without much thought, the mother will reply with words such as, "Yes, the deer are all sad." The child doesn't simply repeat the adult sentence because she hears it as the correct model as the behaviorists would have us believe. Instead she realizes there is something inaccurate about her hypothesis, and she will continue to predict and test until she is ready to recode her theory of how to make plurals.

This same process occurs as children try to make sense of written language that is part of their environment as well. This view of literacy development as a process raises many questions regarding beginning reading and writing instruction because it contrasts with the previously held view which was based on the belief that language development is hierarchical (Myklebust, 1964). In *Language Stories & Literacy Lessons*, Harste, Woodward, and Burke (1984) have addressed the methodological and conceptual issues involved in teaching literacy as a socio-psycholinguistic process. They used children's encounters with spoken and written language as the basis of their research into children's literacy development. British theorist Nancy Martin (1988) concludes that "the way children learn the mother tongue is a potential model for all learning and is in the process of being institutionalized as the interactive model of learning begins to take hold" (p. ix).

The same learning process occurs as children enter school. On the social level, a first grade boy has been taught at home that it is polite to answer when someone asks you a question. During a group discussion, when his friend in the next desk asks him a question, he replies immediately. The teacher explains to the boys that in school it is important to listen carefully when another student is talking so that they don't miss something important. The boy is forced to look back on his theory of polite behavior and recode it. His theory of polite behavior met a school rule. In school the teacher's meanings, the peers' meanings, and the school's meanings will be major actors in causing learners to look back at their theories (meanings) and recode them. Jerome Bruner (1967), in *Toward a Theory of Instruction*, writes that this turning back on recoding of one's actions and experiences is most likely the beginning of growth.

James Britton (1970), in *Language and Learning*, points to an additional facet of learning when he writes that when we begin to see a person creating a representation of the world to operate in, we can see a further mode of operation. We see that the person can also operate directly on that representation.

Language is Central to Learning

We need a symbol system to recode experiences into theories or representations so that we can operate on them and so that we can use them to recode or elaborate on our current representations and experiences. Language is one symbol system, like mathematics, diagrams, drawings, music, etc., which makes our thoughts visible so that they are available for introspection and revision.

Let us first look at the use of language to recode experiences into representations. Britton (1970) observed the way children used language from early childhood to adulthood, and he used these observations in his book

Language and Learning. He observed that young children first use language simply for communication. They learn it and use it in an exchange of meanings with those in their families. As they develop, they can be seen talking to themselves as they play, telling themselves what they are doing, then telling themselves and their dolls or Teddy bears what they plan to do, and finally engaging in imaginative play. Barnes labels this talk "egocentric speech." Vygotsky argues that adults and older children carry on these same functions silently (at least most of the time). He labels this talk "inner speech." The thoughts involved with inner speech are the closest to the surface and are thus most available for reflection and reinterpretation. In summary, we see adults and children using language first to recode experiences into representations and finally to operate on those representations in imaginative play and the debates, discussions, and imaginings of inner speech.

A further thing we know about language that helps us see how it is important in learning is the understanding of its dual functioning. Michael Halliday (1978), in *Language as Social Semiotic,* paraphrases Levi-Straus who says "it is good to think," and "it is good to eat." Halliday says that language reflects this duality in its semantic system which is organized around the "twin motifs" of reflection and action.

James Britton theorizes that people use language in two ways: as participants and as spectators. We use language as participants when we communicate, a function like Levi-Straus' "to eat" and Halliday's "action." We use language as spectators when we look back at our representations of the world or ahead in planning, imagination, and reinterpreting, much like Levi-Straus' "to think" and Halliday's "reflection." So we see that language is used to learn. It is used to recode experiences into representations and it is used to operate on those representations.

Talking and Writing, as Well as Reading and Listening, Are Valuable Language Learning Tools

It is commonly accepted that people learn by reading and listening, but talking and writing are less widely accepted. For this reason, I will stress their use.

To illustrate how talk is used to learn, let me use an example. A group of children have been give a poem which has been read to them orally, and they have been instructed to talk about it and return to the teacher when they are done. Each child in this setting decides to explain to the others what the poem said to him/her. As the children work to shape their explanations for the audience, they ask themselves questions such as: What do the other children know and believe about this poem?; What do they think it means?; What do they know about the subject of the poem as I see it?; What will they think about me if I say this?; How can I express my ideas clearly? In the process of shaping the explanation, the children view their representation from a variety of viewpoints and perspectives. As a result, they recode the experience and the succeeding representations. The children have learned from the talking, from any response they might receive from peers, and from the interaction which has enabled this meaning making.

When people write, a similar process occurs. Britton thinks this is a sharper, more difficult, process than talking. It is harder to shape inner speech for a reader because the audience is not directly visible and also possibly because the writer knows the product is on paper for everyone to see. Shaping in writing or exploring in writing are very helpful as the learner reflects on new text, new ideas, and

new information in the light of current representations.

Another type of writing and talking that helps people with the learning process is reflective writing or talking. When they have the time and opportunity to make their thoughts visible regarding new experiences and ideas, they can integrate those half-understood, slippery thoughts into their representations.

Douglas Barnes, who researched these theories about language learning in British classrooms, found very little reflective or exploratory talk or writing being used. Instead, teachers asked students to write and talk for the purpose of expressing what they knew or for performance. Apparently this is true in American classrooms today as well. In John Goodlad's (1984) study of American high schools, he noted that students spent the largest share of their time listening to teachers telling and explaining and writing in workbooks and on worksheets (p. 230). He found that 70 percent of the time in class was spent in talking, and that teachers out-talked students by a ratio of about three to one. In less than one percent of the cases were students asked to respond in any way that required reasoning or an opinion from students (p. 229).

I wish to argue that, because students come to school with well developed language learning skills and complex representations of the world, and because their use of writing, talking, reading, and listening facilitates their learning, teachers need to structure classrooms in which students' knowledge is acknowledged and respected and in which they are given plentiful opportunities to write, talk, read, and listen for the purpose of learning. This is the major implication of these ideas for the language arts classroom.

In *From Communication to Curriculum*, Douglas Barnes (1975) states that it is the teacher who, together with the students, constructs a communication environment in the classroom that limits the way students are able to use their language learning skills, thus also limiting what is learned. He explains that the communication system, which includes the social system, is constructed on the basis of the teacher's rules and expectations and on the way the students interpret the teacher's rules and expectations. When the student comes to the learning situation with his language learning skills and theory of the world, the communication system acts like a "filter" which controls what the student learns.

I will use an example to further explain this: Teacher A is going to teach Poe's short story, "The Tell-Tale Heart." He begins the lesson by telling the students about Poe's life and handing out a list of difficult vocabulary words. Then he reads the first few paragraphs of the story aloud to "hook" the readers. He assigns the rest of the story for tomorrow and instructs the students to look up the definitions of the words and write a sentence in which each is used correctly. The next day he gives students a quiz to make sure they read the story and collects the sentences and leads the students through a series of questions he has planned which will lead them to an understanding of how Poe built suspense.

The communication environment in this classroom is closed to students' meaningful participation. The teacher clearly believes he has the correct and only approach to the story. He makes all the decisions regarding what they will read, what they will discuss, what is important in the story, which words the students do not know, and how they will "learn" them. The students have learned that in this classroom they are expected to be passive learners; they are only required to remember the details of

the story and what the teacher considers important. There is no room for students to use their language skills for learning. The communication environment has limited their learning in very real ways.

Teacher B, on the other hand, is also teaching Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart." She opens the class by asking students to write or talk about the pictures that illustrate the story, or she may put the word "guilt" on the board and guide students through some semantic mapping in order to help them see "guilt" in more complex terms and as an introduction to a major concept in the story. After the story is read, she may ask students to respond to the story in writing, then to share their response in a small group, which would report to the whole class. There is plenty of opportunity for students to use what they know and to reflect, explore, and shape meanings in talking, writing, listening, and reading in this classroom.

The open communication environment has communicated to these students that they are expected to have ideas, make meanings, explore. They are aware that their meanings are valued and important. This communication environment facilitates the students' use of language to learn.

A major implication of these ideas, then, is that the teacher must construct an open communications system in the classroom. Two examples of this type of classroom are found in Nancie Atwell's (1987) *In the Middle: Writing, Reading, and Learning with Adolescents* and Lucy Calkins' (1986) *The Art of Teaching Writing*. Atwell's workshop method for teaching reading and writing allows students to choose their own books and their own topics for writing, to follow their interests from fiction to nonfiction, to respond to teacher and peers in meaningful ways, and it gives students time for reading and writing in class.

To construct an open classroom requires the teacher to see his or her role in a different light. Because students come with so much to the classroom, and because they have proven their ability to learn, the teacher no longer must make all the decisions or contribute all the knowledge. The teacher instead sees himself or herself as more of a mentor or coach to the student. Because the teacher sees students as informed and capable learners, a number of common beliefs about teaching and learning will be changed.

One of these is the view of reading. When the teacher acknowledges that students bring their own representations of the words to the text, she is more liable to see reading as a constructive process. Louise Rosenblatt, who began writing about reader response theory in 1939, wrote in *The Reader, The Text, and the Poem* (1978) that the reader and the text transact, and the result of that is a new text which she calls "the poem." Wolfgang Iser (1974) calls the new text a "virtual text," and Benton and Fox (1985) suggest the reader creates a "secondary world." This representation of the text is the result of the transaction, and so it is available for the reader to operate in or on. There will not be one right meaning in this literature classroom.

The teacher who acknowledges and values what students bring to the learning situation and who understands the importance of using language to learn will structure the class time in different ways. The teacher will seek ways for students to use exploratory and reflective speech and writing as well as time for them to shape meanings and report these meanings to their peers. One way to facilitate student talk is to use small groups. Some ways to have students explore and reflect in writing are journals, learning logs, and informal responses to peers, teachers, and texts. These teachers will not emphasize final draft writings or final draft talk.

These teachers will not see themselves as evaluators and assessors of students' work, but will instead attempt to read and listen as repliers or "real" readers or listeners. Their responses will encourage students to continue their inquiry, not to derail it or sidetrack it into the teacher's interests. This teacher will organize the classroom so that students can respond to each other and to the teacher and to the text. Purves, Rogers, and Soter (1990) have suggested a number of ways to respond and to encourage response in their book *How Porcupines Make Love II: Teaching in a Response-Centered Literature Classroom*.

The common student-teacher interaction: question, answer, evaluative comment will give way to real questions, many of which will be asked by students. A whole set of new common understandings regarding classroom participation, role behaviors, and student-teacher interaction will replace those studied and reported by Edwards and Mercer (1987) in *Common Knowledge*, Michael Halliday (1978) in *Language as Social Semiotic*, and Edwards and Westgate (1987) in *Investigating Classroom Talk*.

The understanding that students bring complex theories or representations of the world and highly developed language learning skills to the learning situation, and the knowledge that in order to learn students must use these language skills have important implications for the language arts classroom. Language arts classrooms restructured on the basis of these implications have the potential to be lively, exciting places where all participants are engaged in meaningful learning. These classrooms are truly learner-centered.

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Barbara Livdahl received the EdD in Language Arts Education from the University of North Dakota in August 1991, and is a professor in Teacher Education at Valparaiso University in Indiana.

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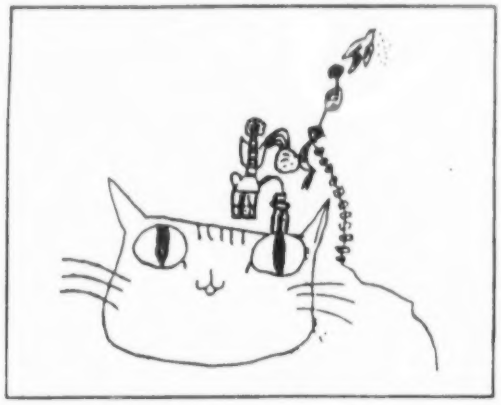

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